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Citation: Mutsvairo, Bruce and Ragnedda, Massimo (2019) Does Digital Exclusion Undermine Social Media's Democratizing Capacity? *New Global Studies*, 13 (3). pp. 357-364. ISSN 2194-6566

Published by: De Gruyter

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2019-0035> <<https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2019-0035>>

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Editors' Forum

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Does Digital Exclusion Undermine Social Media's Democratizing Capacity?

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2019-0035>

Abstract: Claims have been made that the advent of social media and its assumed ability to fuel social strife and organize anti-government protests has empowered people around the world to successfully challenge repressive authorities. However, in an era in which several issues ranging from digital colonialism to digital exclusion among other challenges, have become so dominant, it is our role as researchers to question some of these claims especially when they seem unsubstantiated. Sharing or finding solidarity is something that can be done on social media platforms but nothing is as critical as being part of the digital community. In that regard, questions surrounding digital exclusion are critical especially when discussing the extent to which social media influences democracy, questions that several scholars from every corner of the world are currently seized with. In this article, we not only identify social media's potential but we also probe problems associated with beliefs that digital networks have the capacity to support democratization. Contemporary societies should be asking what the real gains of the fall of the Berlin Wall are in the work of these fundamental digital shifts, which have left both negative and positive outcomes on all countries including established Western democracies.

Keywords: Africa, digital networks, democratization, digital divide, information and communication technology

Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall is taken to symbolize international progress as the rapid expansion and transformation to democracy is noted to have accelerated at the expense of the fading authoritarian communist regimes. Shared democracy

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movements across the globe began ushering in new innovations, opening a new world of opportunities ranging from new markets to evolving technologies. Fast forward to 2010, when the Arab Spring, a citizen-based political movement that some believe was instrumental in promoting democratic changes in the Arab world, grabbed headlines leaving researchers pondering on whether citizen journalism and social media have the capacity to drive democratization in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions of the “Global South.” With claims that digital inequalities have expanded in Africa also gathering steam, many have wondered how Africans could use social media to advance democratization if they are socially and digitally excluded. Is social media making Africa freer and if so, to what extent could digital exclusion potentially hamper plausible democratizing gains made so far, if any? The objectives of the essay are thus to i) examine ways through which social media and citizen journalism are enabling democratization in sub-Saharan countries ii) identify the extent and mechanisms by which citizen journalism in Africa has led to changes in political processes and practices iii) critique and conceptualize digital exclusion within an Afrocentric context.

Is Citizen Journalism Driving Political Participation in sub-Saharan Africa?

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, a citizen-based political movement due to commemorate its 10th anniversary in 2020 and credited in the West for promoting political changes in the Arab world, some researchers have suggested that social media and citizen journalism is now driving political participation in sub-Saharan Africa. In an increasingly globalized world, political challenges faced by countries in the Global South are of pressing concern to the European polity. Africa has a disproportionate number of precarious states and a history of failed states. It is vital to understand the best ways in which both scholars and policy makers can support the development of these states as robust and sustainable democracies. While it is true that to reduce marginalization, it is indispensable to promote equal access to and use of technologies (Castells 2001), we must, at the same time, go beyond a reflexive celebration of citizen journalism and social media as the panacea for political and social problems in African states. We need, therefore, to build a detailed, context-specific understanding of how these technologies and practices could help build and sustain democracies, and how we, as academic researchers, can contribute to this process. We therefore should not underestimate that, in the so-called network society (van Dijk 1999; Castells

1996), technologies and knowledge are guided by economic interests and profits, and are controlled by a small elite from the Global North that self-defend their interests and privileges (Latouche 2010; Lyotard 1984). In the era of perpetual fights between the center and the periphery, between the North and the South, information is seen more as a commodity rather than a right, and knowledge is used to control and impose rather than emancipate and expand democracy.

As we write, we find ourselves stuck in a perilous period as news broke late October 2019 that the ethnic killings that claimed over 70 people in Ethiopia had been ignited by “fake news” that spread on Facebook and other social media platforms. While it is true that citizen journalism and social media have improved the capacity to spread news and information, in some parts of the world, the term “fake news” has been hogging the limelight for a while now. “Fake news” has also led to sectarian killings in India.

Service provider Whatsapp has been singled out for spreading false information, making it more and more difficult for online readers to find a trustworthy source of information. Without the skills to understand which sources to trust, how to look for and store information and which news to share on their platforms, citizens are disadvantaged as access to the digital arena remain largely limited and even for those with access, other challenges such as digital illiteracy are rampant. Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that technologies, developed in Western societies, are not necessarily and automatically meant for Africa. Western countries had more than 400 years, since the Gutenberg revolution, to embed information and communication technologies (ICTs) and media industries into their society (Barber 2006; Mattelart 2003), consolidating themselves as “center,” and controlling peripheries through cultural (Tomlinson 1991), end electronic imperialism (McPhail 1981; Said 2001). Facebook’s Africa office, for instance, is located in Dublin (Ireland) thus far away from the cultural, political and economic contexts in which it is operating and making profit. While Facebook is liable to financial and legal penalties imposed by a German court, the American social networking company is not answerable to remedies sought from African courts. Yet, more than 140 million people in Africa use Facebook. Some African governments have shut down Facebook or the internet altogether arguing the cross-platform messenger app Whatsapp, also owned by Facebook, was being used to spread “fake news” across the continent forcing others to question whether social media companies like Facebook were undermining efforts to “democratize” Africa. Africans should thus realize that the availability of digital technologies will only benefit them if and when they accept that these digital technologies are not meant for them. It was technology in the first place that was used in colonizing Africa. If they want to use them, they need to fight against digital colonialism for example by promoting the use

of African languages and using these platforms only if they are in tandem with their circumstances. The risk is that global media, as McPhail has underlined, became the voice of the “Center” without giving room to public-non-profit interest, “periphery’s voices” and without promoting cultural diversity. Even in the US, social media platforms are having plenty of critics on their role in a democracy especially in the wake of Facebook’s \$5 billion federal fine for privacy violations.

The Rapid Growth of Digital Technologies in Africa: Risks and Challenges

Africa, more than any other continent, has seen the number of internet users increasing since 2000 (Mumbere 2018). Africa, indeed, is ranked top of the global internet penetration growth ranking (Mutsvairo 2016). This exemplifies both how digital technologies are more and more important and vital to citizens living in Africa, and how these technologies may impact life chances and opportunities. With this rapid growth in internet connectivity, the economic benefits stemming from greater connectivity in several African economies cannot be underestimated. However, the growing number of internet users and the fast development of digital technologies is not without risks and challenges. It is, therefore, important to critically evaluate the benefits and challenges of a “technologically revolutionized” Africa.

As noted by Warschauer (2004, 14),

a framework of technology for social inclusion allows us to reorient the focus from that of gaps to be overcome by provision of equipment to that of social development to be enhanced through the effective integration of ICT into communities and institutions. This kind of integration can only be achieved by attention to the wide range of physical, digital, human, and social resources that meaningful access to ICT entails.

For this reason, while analyzing the benefits of digital revolution in the African context, we need to go beyond the dichotomic division between those who access and those who are excluded from the digital realm and focus on the multidimensionality of digital inequalities. In fact, while the gap in accessing the digital technologies in general, and Internet in particular, has declined over time, this does not automatically translate into a society of digital equity, where everyone can enjoy and exploit the benefits brought by the Internet and latest digital technologies. Inequalities, indeed, persist in ICTs not only in terms of access to, but also in terms of appropriation and beneficial use of those

technologies. If not addressed, these digital inequalities may further reinforce and exacerbate already existing social inequalities (Ragnedda 2018).

This is particularly true in a continent such as Africa, which is characterized by strong social inequalities that are not only replicated but also reinforced online. It is then vital, both for scholars and policy makers, to look at the social structures and social inequalities, while analyzing the impact of digital technologies in a specific context, such as Africa. It would be wrong to assume that inequalities in the adoption and use of ICTs are only based on economic factors and that digital inequalities might be solved by simply expanding the digital infrastructures or proposing policy to reduce the price of Internet connection.

To be clear, these policies, often adopted in African countries, are vital in tackling digital inequalities, but are not enough to promote a digital inclusive society. The digital divide goes, indeed, well beyond the inequalities in terms of possession of resources and devices to access the Internet (known as the first level of digital divide) and it involves multiple dimensions, such as autonomy of use, technical access, social support, digital literacy and skills and inequalities in the types of use. In fact, accessing the Internet is only the first step in reducing digital inequalities, given the different ways of engaging and using ICTs (Witte and Mannon 2010) and the different benefits and advantages individuals get from its uses. Remapping the digital inclusion and digital inequalities agenda (Ragnedda and Ruiu 2017) has clear consequences not only for researchers but also for policy makers and private actors involved in reducing digital inequalities in a complex and vast continent such as Africa. Introducing into the policy agenda both the second level of the digital divide, or inequalities in use (Attewell 2001), and the third level of digital divide, or inequalities in tangible outcomes users gain from using ICTs (Ragnedda 2017), means putting at the center of policymakers' priorities the investment in promoting digital skills (Thomas and Wyatt 2001), confidence (Faulkner and Kleif 2003), digital literacy (Litt 2003) and motivation (van Dijk 2005) in using digital technologies.

Given the importance of digital technologies and given the fact that social and digital exclusion are deeply intertwined, more and more initiatives and strategies implemented in African countries to tackle social inequalities and social exclusion, are focusing on implementing ICTs. However, to foster individuals' engagement with civic and political institutions, it is not only important to improve access to ICTs, but it is vital to reflect on inequalities in usage patterns (Selwyn 2004), the reasons why the individual uses the Internet (Anderson 2005) and the different levels of e-inclusion (van Dijk 2005), gradation of technology use (Livingstone and Helsper 2007), and enhance individual digital capital (Ragnedda, Ruiu, Addeo 2019). Indeed, if these digital inequalities are not addressed the risk to reinforce

already existing social inequalities remains notably high, potentially alienating those who are already socially e-marginalized from the digital arena.

Conclusion

In spite of what we are told are increasing opportunities that technology and innovation offer for human development and transformation in Africa, it would be a mistake to consider the advent of ICTs as the panacea that could solve all social, political and economic inequalities. As we have seen, a binary way of analyzing digital inequalities, mainly based on the number of citizens accessing and using ICTs, does not understand and explain the gradations of e-inclusion and its intertwined relationship with social inequalities. This is important not only from a conceptual and theoretical point of view, but also from social and practical perspectives. Indeed, while the digital inclusion initiatives, both promoted by public and private actors, in many African states have attempted to bridge the first level of digital divide by reducing prices and facilitating faster physical access, there still is need to focus on digital literacy and digital skills that promote an equal use of ICTs among people.

Furthermore, sometimes, the agenda is driven by Western-centric interests and ideology, thus limiting the emancipatory revolutionary potentiality of digital technologies. While improving digital infrastructure is vital to opening the door to citizens into the digital realm, this strategy alone is not enough to guarantee full digital inclusion for everyone. In this vein, it is worth noting that in a number of African countries, fast internet and mobile-phone reception is available only in and around the capital or bigger cities. That is problematic because only 40% of sub-Saharan Africa's population live in cities. The spread of smartphones, which has been seen as advancing Africa's transformative possibilities of mobile technology, is also problematic because owning a phone does not translate to empowerment. Instead of embracing Western advancement in technology, Africa needs to develop and establish its own technological developments. Innovations such as mobile money, which were developed in Africa, have proven to be a huge success. The overreliance on technologies developed in the West or in some cases East, leaves Africa a fertile ground for recolonization with pressures emerging from globalization, for example, seeing African universities seeking to internationalize and compete in a global market. However, these endeavors sometimes come at the expense of the local folk, who argue that their higher institutions should remain locally relevant first.

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